Lynn Maxfield, Associate Editor

Being versus Doing: Conflating Identity with Occupation

Lynn Maxfield

I MAGINE I'M STANDING IN LINE and strike up a conversation with the stranger next to me. When the conversation progresses to the point of introducing myself, what is the first thing I say? My name? OK, then what? I'd make a pretty confident bet that the next thing out of my mouth is something along the lines of "and I'm a singing teacher." In our society, our profession is nearly inseparable from our identity. We say things such as, "I *am* a singing teacher," instead of "I teach singing lessons." Setting aside the possible argument that I am merely choosing simpler language, it seems more likely that it is indicative of a condition in which my profession is who I *am*, not just what I *do*.

This condition is pervasive, at least in Western cultures, and certainly not unique to our profession. But, our profession was uniquely positioned to suffer the consequences of this condition over the past year and a half as what we *do*, and therein who we *are* was brought to a screeching halt by the SARS CoV-2 virus. The tremendous efforts to move online notwithstanding, we had to grapple with being told that we *could not* do what had been doing. It was up to us to adapt, or not. For those of us who *are* singing teachers, that message was akin to being told to change our identity, or stop being. It presented nothing short of an existential crisis.

To its great credit, NATS has reacted impressively to support teachers and students through this period. Similarly, individuals have selflessly committed countless hours to developing and sharing strategies for adapting studios in a truly remarkable show of cooperative compassion. Nonetheless, the pandemic-related disruption in employment and occupation has taken a significant toll on mental health in the United States. Indeed, nearly 4 in 10 adults in the United States have reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety and/or depression during the pandemic.[1] That is a *four-fold increase* over those reporting similar symptoms in the first half of 2019.[2] Nationwide, our correlation of self-identity and occupation predisposed us to greater mental health impacts when our occupations were disrupted. While industry specific data are not available for teachers of singing, we are certainly not immune to these conditions.

ENMESHMENT

As it has done in countless arenas, in this regard the pandemic only exacerbated an already existing condition. A 2019 study investigating workplace burnout among millennials found that nearly 70% of the 2,059 respondents

identified themselves *only* through their job.[3] That is, those respondents were unable to conceive of a self-identity outside of their occupation. Entire psychology practices are now being devoted solely to helping individuals navigate the mental health impacts of career/life balance. A psychologist at one such practice, Janna Koretz, has drawn a parallel between our relationship with our jobs and our relationships with other people, borrowing the term *enmeshment.*[4]

In family and relationship psychology, enmeshment refers to an unhealthy condition in which boundaries between two or more individuals become blurred, causing individuals in these relationship to lose sight of their own identity.[5] They can exist only within the context of that relationship. It isn't a stretch to see how this concept can apply to how we interact with our careers. If we identify solely as our occupation, if we are enmeshed with our career, we risk relinquishing balance in our personal psychological well-being. Koretz suggests the following questions to help investigate your own degree of enmeshment with your career:

1. How much do you think about your job outside of the office? Is your mind frequently consumed with work-related thoughts? Is it difficult to participate in conversations with others that are not about your work?

2. How do you describe yourself? How much of this description is tied up in your job, title, or company? Are there any other ways you would describe yourself? How quickly do you tell people you've just met about your job?

3. Where do you spend most of your time? Has anyone ever complained to you that you are in the office too much?

4. Do you have hobbies outside of work that do not directly involve your work-related skills and abilities? Are you able to consistently spend your time exercising other parts of your brain?

5. How would you feel if you could no longer continue in your profession? How distressing would this be to you?[6]

KEEPING UP

Social media has taken the problem of dwindling work/life balance and supercharged it. As we view our "peers" amplifying their career exploits on their media accounts, our tendency is to assume that what we see posted is an accurate representation of their exploits. We do not see those colleagues take a walk in the rain, or sit at the dog park, or watch their child strike out in little-league baseball. We are privy only to the curated depiction of the life they portray and we compare our real life to the idealized version we see.

I fall prey to this situation regularly as a considerable majority of my social media network is populated by friends and acquaintances who work in my industry—our industry. When I allow my self-worth to be determined largely by my career success or failure, my mental health suffers because of the myopic view of my peers' successes and failures that social media presents. Again, I am not alone in this. While causative effects of social media on mental health are still being investigated, a recent systematic review of the extant research in this field revealed striking correlations between social media interaction and conditions of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress.[7]

BUT WE LOVE WHAT WE DO

As artists or artist-adjacent workers, we may be lulled into false sense safety by the notion that we *get* to do what we love, so we should be content to be defined by that career. Furthermore, we likely have been told along the way that our success in the industry required singular focus on the profession. We have been conditioned for potential enmeshment with our careers. We may have even conditioned our students in the same way.

To be sure, building a strong focus on your work, and even feeling a sense of purpose in your occupation can produce positive results. It can motivate to find creative solutions to nagging problems and to perform at a high level. But, author and consultant Jeffery Davis cautions, "Basing your life's meaning on your work is not the same as crafting meaning in your work. You can enjoy purpose-fueled work without losing yourself in the process."[8]

MOVING FORWARD

If you, as I, answered Dr. Koretz's questions earlier with responses that suggest there is room for improvement in how you define the relationship between you and your job, what is to be done? Koretz gives the deceptively

simple directive of "free up time"—optimizing your work flow to provide free time and, crucially, filling that time with non-work-related activities.[9] This directive may be met with scoffs and guffaws. "If only it were that easy," you might say (I did). Her second directive, however, provides a ray of hope: start small. Try new things without the pressure of needing to master them. Let yourself play again, as you did when you first fell in love with making music. Finally, she suggests adding to your network. As you venture into new pursuits or rekindle old interests, make connections with others who share similar interests. Allow space for relationships outside your career field. You may find that you actually draw on those relationships to fuel creativity and problem-solving when you return to work.

As one final suggestion, though I make no claim of being a psychology expert, take my advice and don't overcommit to any one element of your new self-identity—spending a few hundred dollars on a new set of clubs when you've never golfed is not going to make you love golf, or yourself. Take it from me.

NOTES

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2. National Center for Health Statistics, "Early Release of Selected Mental Health Estimates Based on data from the January-June 2019 National Health Interview Survey," *National Health Interview Survey Early Release Program*; https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhis/earlyrelease/ERmentalhealth-508.pdf (accessed April 30, 2021).

3. Yellowbrick Program, "Survey Reveals Factors Behind Millennial Burnout," *Yellowbrick Blog*; https://www.yellowbrickprogram.com/blog/survey-reveals-factors-behind-millennial-burnout#gsc.tab=0 (accessed April 30, 2021).

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5. Salvador Minuchin, Lester Baker, Bernice L. Rosman, Ronald Liebman, Leroy Milman, and Thomas C. Todd, "A Conceptual Model of Psychosomatic Illness in Children: Family Organization and Family Therapy," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 32, no. 8 (August 1975): 1031–1038.

6. Koretz.

7. Betul Keles, Niall McCrae, and Annmarie Grealish, "A Systematic Review: The Influence of Social Media on Depression, Anxiety and Psychological Distress in Adolescents," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 25, no. 1 (December 2020): 79–93.

8. Jeffery Davis, "You Are Not Your Work," *Psychology Today*; https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/tracking-wonder/201903/you-are-not-your-work (accessed April 30, 2021).

9. Koretz.

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V
Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Percy Bysshe Shellly,
from "Ode to the West Wind"